

Juvenile Delinquency: A Multi - Disciplinary Approach, .

Problems of Minority Groups

When I was first approached with reference to my participation in this very worth-while symposium, my initial impulse was to decline as gracefully as possible, because of a fallacy which influences so many of us who are called upon to consider or to discuss social, psychological or economic problems such as delinquency, crime, poverty and other troublesome ills of the day. Our society has developed a peculiar skill in turning over to the social scientists and educators almost the full responsibility for analyzing, simplifying and resolving these embarrassing problems because of the pain we must endure if we devote our own feeble efforts to their consideration.

Through this process of abdication, those intimate parts of our existence, youth, Law and the Community become remote and insoluble problems to us when they arrive at a state of estrangement or conflict. The fact that this symposium, extending over a period of sixteen weeks, is devoted to a multi - disciplinary approach to the problem of juvenile delinquency, is in itself a tacit admission that these intimate extensions of ourselves, our Youth, our law enforcement machinery, our community, are in a state of conflict, and that we are bewildered by our individual and collective incompetencies in dealing with these parts of ourselves with whom we should have free and lively communication, and reasonably adequate understanding.

We are here because there is little communication and very inadequate understanding, because of the absence of our direct and positive identification with the many factors which contribute to conflict. There is little or no communication here, and where channels of communication are closed, there exist in their stead, rumor, suspicion, distrust, and conflict. The relationship of Youth to the Community, and to the regulatory arm of the community, Law, is taking on the same complexion as that which plagues us in growing interreligious tensions, in the ominous hardening of relationships between Labor and Management, or in the critical problems that have developed in Negro-white relations, in the South particularly. We are living in a cold-war climate, domestically as well as internationally. And, largely because, in our intransigence, we close off all the channels of free communication in areas of mutual interest, because of obstacles confronting us in one or more points of disagreement, or because of the discomfort which frequently accompanies recognition of our own neglect.

The maintenance of free channels of communication pre-supposes at all times that man is sufficiently intelligent, mature and self-searching, that he is influenced by the same moral and spiritual values which our culture enunciates and professes. We give lip service to the basic value in western culture, namely, the Dignity of the Human Personality. We continually give voice to such value concepts as our belief in a Sense of Moral Responsibility, in the nurturing of our Institutions which aid spiritual and intellectual growth, in our Devotion to Truth, and Respect for Excellence; we repeat our pledge to Principles of Moral Equality, of Common Consent, and of Brotherhood as a functional concept; we believe in the Pursuit of Happiness (our own, at least) and in the abstract notion that Spiritual Enrichment is more necessary to Man's soul than material satisfaction, which alone tends to dull and corrode.

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Against this richly colored background of our value structure, our children are exposed to the most effective medium of mass communication ever devised by man: Television, with its plethora of brutal blood-letting Westerns, its salacious, cynical "private eye" programs, and its ridiculously flamboyant and dishonest advertisements. Upon the foundation of solid, moral concepts and values, our eyes and ears are assaulted by the rotten structure of programmatic fraud, larceny and blackmail as disclosed in quiz rigging, payola and fixed athletic events. These revelations, disgusting in themselves, are made more significant by the cynical reactions of highly placed executives, whose "business first" rationalizations are direct repudiations of the value structure which has preserved their right to function in a free, competitive society.

These are but a few of the negative influences which are shaping the attitudes of our youth today. The small youngsters who today, in open-mouthed absorption, are soaking in the chill of horror, the heat of rage and shocking familiarity with brutality induced by the hundreds of murders and beatings enacted weekly in their living rooms, will be the teenagers of 1970 and the adults of 1980, just as the teen-age vandals, and adult muggers and murderers of the present, were the children of those days when we were being taught thru press, radio and television to hate - hate the enemy, the Nazi and the Jap; when as high-spirited youngsters they were learning through these same media that commando tactics were the way war teaches us to deal with the objects of hate.

"But" we are told, "We have the best educational system in the world - these things children see are offset by education and do not have lasting effect." In this thought may be found at least two false assumptions, namely, that ours is "the best" educational system; and that emotional experiences children are having through this avidly sought form of exposure to violence, do not have lasting effect. I am neither an educator nor a psychologist, so suppose I should not enter into the forbidden territory of the highly trained technicians. However, I have been a reasonably intelligent observer of the human drama, watching from a front seat of community action, for many years of the most dramatic period in man's history. Too, I have worked in that area where interplay of socio-economic forces upon human personality has been the most pronounced demonstration, namely, in inter-racial relations. In addition, I am the immediate ancestor of numerous children and grandchildren whose many personalities represent one of the most intriguing studies available to an inquiring mind. I admit, this does not make me an expert - nothing more than a questioning observer.

For instance, as products of an educational system which introduced each of us to the world of which we are a part, we in turn take great pride in the task of educating our children and the children of our fellow citizens along traditional lines. We are, perhaps rightly so, educating them for their role in a materialistic society; to learn to read and write and figure and work out formulae - - and to compete. We teach them, by precept and example, to measure success by the material goods we can accumulate, the press notices we can attract, the houses and neighborhoods we live in or aspire to, the "kind" of people whom we recognize and who recognize us. But, we're very confused and prone to wrangle about whose duty it is to teach moral values; aid them in spiritual growth; lead them into the acceptance of the role of the truly superior human being. We are careful, though, to see that these teachings do not become so spiritual as to divorce them from the

practical expediences confronting "our kind of people." We have become accustomed to -- Nay, we insist upon having -- the kind of teachers who teach language, or math, or music, rather than teachers who teach children! It is only our own children who have the proper influences at home, and whose behavior is beyond reproach.

If, therefore, there are mischievous or troublesome children or teen-agers in the neighborhood, this means that the rest of the community is going to the dogs. The Church is failing in assuming its duty, other parents are neglecting their responsibilities, and the Law ought to be more stringent and vigorously administered.

In the past thirty five years, I have sat in literally dozens of conferences called in each instance to consider the always new and disturbing problem of juvenile destructiveness and lawlessness. Fortunately for me (and I suspect for many of you) I lived in a small rural community where stolen melons, apples and peaches were dismissed as the result of childish pranks, and overturned outhouses at Hallowe'en were par for the course, rather than being considered as cases for juveniles court action. But these forays were not akin to the gang rumbles, zip-gun slayings and other forms of violence characteristic of today's conflict situations. Nevertheless, the closing note in every conference has been the tight-lipped assertion by a respected spokesman, acknowledged by sage nodding of collective heads, that the home and parents are failing in meeting their grave responsibilities.

Today, I am constrained to prolong such conferences and multiply the confusion, by asking "What homes?" - "What kind of homes" - "what parents - parents with what training, preparation, insights, skills in the greatly demanding art of parenthood?" Because, even among us professionals - in the clergy, in education, in social service field - it is difficult to expose the fallacies in our common assumptions that the Act of God which suddenly transforms a person into a parent, also by divine action, gives him the horse-sense and emotional balance which proper parenthood demands of him. In our competitive life, children are being counselled and trained by specialist in preparation for every imaginable vocational pursuit, because training is so necessary to success in earning a livelihood. But, for the most important job in Creation, which demands the wisdom of A Solomon and the patience of Job - the job of parenthood - no training program is available except on the university level in certain schools. We who become parents, approach the awesome task of dealing with the most delicate, impressionable instrument known - the complex of body, mind and spirit that is the human being - almost totally without fitness for the job. Yet, society continues to expect and demand skilled performance from these groping amateurs. All about us may be found evidence of our ready acceptance of false assumptions, which in turn determine the nature of our relationship with and understanding of other human beings.

I have heard a representative of the Puerto Rican Labor Department answer critics of islanders who come north with only light clothing, by asking "How do you describe cold weather to a person who have never been cold nor have experienced cold weather?" I've dealt with families who have just moved out of a slum shack into a modern public housing development, with never any previous experience with a gas range, electric refrigerator, steam heat or automatic elevator. Their only

introduction to either is a tenant's manual which they cannot read, written in language they cannot understand. Yet, the community is distressed because, by osmosis, these people have not promptly adopted the living habits of middle class society. In meeting this situation, however, we find housing administrators who neglect their roles of leader and teacher, to become glorified rent collectors, and traducers of their uninformed, confused and often resentful tenants and clients; we see massive institutions in our highly developed western culture, which are devoted to the principles of education and clean recreation, locked and barred against those for whom ostensibly they were built, and closed during the only hours convenient to their use. We thus have seen thousands of children, in the name of recreation, swarming in the crowded dangerous streets, in the dirty, litter-strewn alleys, and in the dark recesses where poisonous, evil thoughts are bred. These children are tomorrow's parents.

There is another commonly accepted fallacy, namely, that man has the innate quality of lifting himself by his bootstraps and of adjusting automatically to the full appreciation and responsibilities of freedom - that is, "if he's any good!" to use the common expression. To the one inclined to make judgments based upon this fallacy, the implications are that he or his have had the built-in quality out of which springs in full bloom "the self-made man". There is no such creature! We may have been fortunate enough to have chosen ancestors who passed on to us a set of healthy glands geared to normal functioning. For many years thereafter, we are exposed to parents, teachers, religious influences, playmates, accidents and incidents which we later label Experiences.

If, by the way of example, I happen to grow up in the home of a Western European immigrant, I may have known poverty, slum living, discouragement, even mistreatment through various forms of discrimination. I will have behind me some traditions and cultural values bequeathed to me by European ancestors, but many of them will appear to be in conflict with other values encountered in the new environment to which my family and I are being accustomed. These tend to confuse my parents, but my eagerness to become part of the domestic scene makes the new offerings exciting and desirable, despite my parents' reservations. Nevertheless, my Experiences, sometimes contradictory and disturbing, will aid in the decisions I make, for better or for worse. But basically, I am influenced by the fact that my family came here voluntarily, drawn by the strength of a dream, and all about me I see those of my level for whom the dream is coming true. I am able to believe, to have faith, to build hope, even in the face of mistakes which grow out of my confusion. Generations of immigrants have lived through such evolutionary steps, aided every step of the way by gambling odds that being white and Christian, they could shed their immigrant status in a single generation, by this simple step, also crossing the threshold of anonymity and conformity, entering into the haven of safety from proscription, ostracism and discrimination, which signifies that one belongs to the family of free men. This hypothetical person I describe, has been met all along the way by persons and experiences that have served to strengthen his belief and his faith in himself and his destiny. He is not a self-made man.

Consider another hypothetical person who may be the object of criticism and of scorn because of what he seems to be. He too, first becomes aware of his environment in the sordid surroundings of the city slum or the rural slum. His parents, too, are called upon to do the dirty and distasteful work at cheap wages, but there are few or no cultural traditions, no ancient landmarks by which they

are able to guide their course through a difficult period of transition to urban living. In the enforced labor conditions under which they entered Western civilization, they deliberately were deprived of a History, of tribal disciplines, of a value system which worked effectively in their forgotten homeland. Nothing was given in the stead of these destroyed culture patterns, except a harsh doctrine of renunciation, and submission to greater strength and force. Their children, too, suddenly are transformed from rural peasantry to actively competing members of an impersonal urban culture, and without preparation or competent leadership. The other-worldly doctrines of renunciation and submission no longer apply in the new setting, because the economic jungle of the modern city teaches very quickly that competition is the key to existence. Even here there is confusion, and ultimately frustration, because competition is found to be a tool only for certain folk - - most assuredly not for them. You are inferior, they are taught; you cannot learn skills, or languages, or any higher knowledge. You are no good; you are dangerous; you can never hope to reach the levels other occupy - they hear from the very beginning. Would they seek education? - it's a lost cause, because no one will hire your skills. Escape the slums by seeking better housing? - impossible, because no one of other groups will tolerate your presence. Seek wholesome recreation in the town where you live, vote, pay taxes? - inadvisable because others will resent your presence. Here is the constant assault upon personality, a riddling of self-esteem, the whole angry experience ending one day in the peace of a segregated burying ground because the dignified, perpetual care Memorial Park will not permit interment of your body. However well or poorly such an hypothetical person may adjust to his role in life, he is not a self-made man, be he saint or sinner.

The principle difference between these two hypothetical persons, is that the one was able to shed his cloak of strangeness, of difference, with the shedding of Old World accent, customs, dress and behavior patterns, because in this manner he was able to escape ready identification. Conformity, in appearance and manner was his passport to freedom. The other? His skin color or complexion, his hair texture, the way his facial features were assembled, his religion or adherence to cultural traditions and ritual, meant ease of identification and thus to a continuing external non-conformity. He may possess the humility of Lincoln, the versatility of a Benjamin Franklin and the intellectual gifts of a Ralph Waldo Emerson, but he was obviously too stupid to have acquired also the appearance and the religious beliefs that these three stalwarts shared in common.

Allport (3) has contributed to our understanding of factors that help us make even sharper distinctions between those who are less likely to be "captains of their fate," and others, in the highly competitive task of achieving full recognition in our social order. Identifiable and/or "visible" minorities may be distinguished by several criteria which determine the nature and extent of one's exposure to discriminatory treatment, some of these being as follows:

1. Ease of identification by which, through skin color, hair texture, speech inflection, dress, custom or religious observance, persons may be singled out quickly and easily for differential treatment.

2. Pace of assimilation, or the difficulties encountered by an individual or group in the process of eliminating identifying qualities, and conforming to the appearance, speech, dress and behavior of the "master" group.
3. Number and ratio of the minority in the total population.
4. Nature and strength of demands for recognition made by the minority, this in turn being seen as threats to status, job monopoly, political control or even physical safety of the majority group.
5. Emotional history of contact between the particular minority and the rest of society, as measured by the heritage of anger, fear or guilt this history has bequeathed.
6. The degree of exploitation, social, economic or political, to which the group has been or may be exposed with relative impunity.
7. The number, type and duration of rumors which are made to apply to the group or groups in question.

For the benefit of those persons who are inclined to equate delinquency and crime with out-group innate qualities, it is important for us to say that there is enough of statistical evidence of a high incidence of law violation among minority groups, to give rise to this fallacious construction. Because, I would point to police records and sensational news stories over the past century and a quarter of American industrial development and population growth, to show that the immigrant ancestors of highly respected, first citizens of today, were themselves the feared enemies of the Law and the community, during their era of rejection, confusion and frustration. Because whatever the racial or ethnic identity of the newest and strangest group in the burgeoning industrial community, each passed through the crucible which tested assimilability - which really means, ability to conform. Even then, there were those who blamed the parents for the anger of children who were undergoing the painful crucible test.

From sociological studies undertaken in the 40's by the American Youth Commission,¹ to the more recent research conducted by a team of psychiatrists (Kardiner and Ovesey, "The Mark of Oppression")² there is clinical evidence that constant experience with the humiliation of rejection forces upon the victim certain choices, however unconscious in the making the decisions may be. Finding

(3) "The Nature of Prejudice", Dr. Gordon Allport, Doubleday & Co., New York, 1958

1/ "Color, Class and Personality" Warner, Junker & Adams: American Council on Education, "Color and Human Nature", Sutherland Washington, D.C., 1942

2/ "The Mark of Oppression", Kardiner & Ovesey, W. W. Norton, New York, 1951

oneself rejected, reviled and shunted into a lower level of being and of expectation, one gravitates into a state of complete submission, on the one hand, or on the other, elects to resist, to fight back against the forces which would rob him of his birthright of freedom. If he submits, even as a partial or temporary concession to a greater force, the habits of submission ultimately rob him of initiative, ambition, constructive imagination and spiritual vigor. He becomes the living example of inadequacy and incompetence which his exploiter cited as the reason for the original oppressive action toward him and his kind.

In resisting, his form of revolt will vary as circumstances, human relations climate, and personal temperament and capacity may dictate. He may yield either to the urge to Excel, to Repel or to Rebel. He may be the personality who stubbornly will set his jaw and vow to be better than any of his tormentors, whether in scholarship, physical accomplishment, or business acumen, and will burn the midnight oil literally or figuratively, to achieve this end. Think if you will of the tens of thousands of sons of immigrants who have achieved success through such compulsion. Others, not possessing either the temperament nor capacity, will nevertheless yield to the tempting challenge "to show them", and resort to the cheap, the tawdry, the transitory expedient of flaunting possessions, America's symbol of success. The gangster of foreign-born background, in his ruthless pursuit of wealth and power, is impelled by the same drive as is the Negro construction worker who insists upon ownership of a Buick or Cadillac car to park in front of his slum hovel. The difference in choice lies in the strength of the drive or urge, and the opportunity for expression of the compulsion.

They who respond to the urge to Repel, through repeated humiliation and injury to feelings, learn to avoid danger by avoiding those who represent danger, members of the oppressor group. This segment of the minority world shuts out of its field of interest and action all parts of the majority group world. They rationalize their actions by developing a strong racial or nationalistic philosophy. Elijah Muhammed of today has replaced Marcus Garvey of 30 years ago, but between the two large scale racial movements have been myriads of proponents of isolated nationalism in America, both racial and ethnic. In the immigrant groups of the past, the kinships conveyed by Old World ties have served as a solace to the hurts endured by those who wanted most desperately to be completely American. But there is even a more unhealthy form of isolation manifested by escapist in minority groups. These are they who seek escape and release through primitive religion, through riotous living fueled by alcohol or drugs, and through the personally satisfying medium of cultism. Individuals expressing a spirit of revolt through cult escapism, have developed their own cultural climate, their own badge of identification in the garb of the zoot-suit of a few years ago, the be-bop of yesterday, and the "beatnik" of the painful moment. Even their language is geared to their needs: Like you cats cant dig their jive puts them way out and leaves you squares from nowhere. So, the illusion of having rejected the world from their exclusive fraternity, gives tremendous satisfaction to many who have been hurt, who are lost, who fear.

The urge to Rebel has, perhaps, enticed the greater number of the identifiable minorities who feel rejected - as well as many individuals of the majority group who in their personal, emotional lives endure the pain of feeling rejected. Healthier manifestations of this spirit are responsible for the world's and History's rebels and patriots, in all ages and climes. The single difference

between the two is that the patriot is the rebel who succeeded in his self-appointed mission. Whether he was an indignant New England farmer who picked up his flintlock musket at George Washington's request, or the martyred Negro postal worker in Florida who was dynamited into eternity because of dedication to a cause, these are the people to whom the free world owes an undying debt of gratitude, because it was their intelligent, organized and courageous rebellion against injustice that has won and kept alive our freedoms in the western world.

But it is the rebel who is neither organized, intelligent nor particularly courageous, a Comparatively small part of any ethnic or racial minority, from whom the whole group is caused to derive its reputation. Be he youth or adult, his spirit of rebellion is marked by anger, distrust, cynicism and a desire to strike back. Perhaps parent failure was largely responsible, and just as likely someone failed the parent. This, it seems to me is an area of thought that should receive much greater attention than we have been willing to give heretofore. It is not enough to view with alarm the lawless acts of successive generations of juvenile and adult offenders, or to place the blame at the door of the parent. It is incumbent upon us to see where the community may have failed the parent.

Obviously, no parent can hope, completely and successfully, to overcome the searing effect that repeated racial, ethnic and religious discrimination has upon the personality of his child. He may or may not have the wisdom and the power to shield the child from lasting pain, but as long as this evil practice persists, society will continue to pay a horrible price.

First, then, it seems to me, group work leadership must place less emphasis upon statistics in measuring the effectiveness of its work, and more upon the development of insights and skills for reaching and counselling the queer one, the quiet one, the misfit and the confused; aid the compulsive, the withdrawn and the rebellious one. Secondly, adult education is not alone the province of the educator. The social service worker, the cop on the beat, and the intergroup agency professional and volunteer can do miracles in giving guidance to groping, bewildered, untrained parents. I have seen some unbelievably successful results accomplished in family units by a devoted and skilled Urban League neighborhood worker, but there has been such pitifully little of this kind of valuable service given.

The National Conference of Christians and Jews is sponsoring Human Relations workshops in 50 colleges and universities all over the country, and achieving great success in teaching good human relations beliefs and practices to teachers, social workers, clergymen, businessmen, police and persons from all walks of life. We are promoting Police-Community Relations institutes on national, regional and local levels, with the design of opening another channel of communication which has been closed too long. While in America we have seen many years given to the promotion of youth camping, it is only recently that concerted effort has been made to develop youth encampment programs that take youngsters out of sheltered, socially sterile, ingroup existence, and expose them to problems of citizenship on an intercultural meeting ground. Here is one of the most promising areas wherein our value structure may be reviewed and analyzed under realistic testing situations and in a profitable living experience.

More recently, we in NCCJ are promoting institutes and seminars in various parts of the country, wherein representatives of labor and management may sit

together in exchange of views in matters of common interest, to accustom themselves to conversation in situations other than those involving bargaining conflicts. Because, these two great forces in American life also are joint guardians of our traditions - our system of values, and the Nation cannot afford to see these basic moral concepts lost in the heat of bitter dispute and recrimination.

There are but a few means of reaching back into the heart of the community where opinions are molded, attitudes shaped, morality nurtured or neglected, decisions made; the community in which parents-to-be are reared, and from which they receive their inspirations, encouragements or discouragements. There are pitifully few of these efforts being made, and we who represent a combination of religious, educational and service agencies, also are the most potent combination of awareness, skill and influence the community possesses. If the state of lawlessness in our communities has infected our youth, and we hear the solemn note of warning being rung, "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls - -".

Permit me to make this final observation. Although man has the capacity to think, to plan, to predict, to make choices, he has to learn to be free; and to be truly free, he must learn to accept the great responsibilities freedom places upon his shoulders. Behavior that leads to, and that deserves, freedom must be learned from the environment, from the experiences which prepare one for freedom. The slave may fight for freedom but he still must learn to be free, for the yearning for freedom is a built-in hunger of the human heart, while the capacity for freedom is acquired in an atmosphere in which freedom can be savored, practiced, refined, and nurtured. Children, the worlds keenest observers and realists, adopt the language, habits, morals and superstitions of the environment in which they are placed. Neither parent, nor school, nor church, nor law alone, is the engineer shaping this environment. All of us share the responsibility for community failure. May more and more of us be imaginative enough, bold enough, dedicated enough to re-examine our respective roles in preserving the community climate, in which all youth may find freedom and healthy self-esteem.

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